

THE LUCKIEST LITTLE HIGH SCHOOL: THE POSSIBILITIES AND PANGS OF COMMUNITY DEMOCRACY

Introduction

The rapid transformation of a secondary school from a bureaucratically regimented institution to a student-centered learning environment advocating democratic practices merits review. During its third year of progressive reform, this gem was discovered among the ashes of high-stakes assessment and corporate infiltration in public education. I will share my observations of what I have come to regard as the luckiest little high school, its achievements, contradictions, challenges, and promises. This study emphasizes the rapid revolution of a small rural school characterized by conformity and compliance to an artistically and democratically expressive student center for intellectual, emotional, and spiritual engagement.

In Pursuit of Democratic Education

My initial interest lay in the practices of school leaders who had forged major efforts to ensure democratic involvement for secondary students. American educational theorists have contributed a century of literature that grounds the focal tenets of a community democratic school. These include student ownership of curricular content and activities (Apple & Beane, 1995; Dewey, 1944; Giroux, 1997; Meier, 1995), the formation of a multicultural perspective (Apple & Beane, 1995; Calabrese & Barton, 1994; Denith, 1997; Dixon, 1998; Giroux, 1997; Kanpol, 1992; Maxcy, 1998), and structures of governance to gain critical community consciousness (Apple & Beane, 1995; Giroux, 2000; Giroux & McLaren, 1986; Johnson & Pajares, 1996; Rusch, 1994).

These ideals are often muddled in the busy world of distracted administrators, constrained teachers, and hurried children. However it is my intent to appreciate the democratic reforms underway at the school of which I have become so enamored. While I will divulge the inconsistencies observed, analysis will concentrate on the source of its success. Hence I take liberty in ordaining the luckiest little high school.

Research Inquiry

The purpose of the research of which this study was a part was to engage secondary school administrators, who were responsible for disciplinary matters, in “critical conversations about democracy” within their local educational system (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 3). Pursuing qualitative inquiry as a non-participant observer (Creswell, 2002), I conducted observations and interviews in four schools in order to elucidate the underpinning philosophy that these deans of students put into practice. Utilizing Lewis and Maruna’s (1994) concept of a “person as the unit of analysis” (p. 232), I shadowed each of the four professionals at work for a period of four to eight hours and thereafter conducted a standardized open-ended interview (Patton, 1990). In addition, the members of a standing student leadership com-

mittee or an adhoc group of active students chosen by the dean were interviewed. Finally, in three schools I observed a governance council which included students as participants in the decision-making process. The fourth school, though it practiced progressive teaching methods, did not maintain such as structure.

While I engaged in the research design and analysis from a critical theoretical perspective, which ultimately focused my attention on an emerging community school democracy in one low-income district, I refrained from exploring the third level of this approach, which is taking action (Glesne, 1999). However, Moustakas (1994) suggests that phenomenological study requires the researcher to discover "a topic and question rooted in autobiographical meanings and values, as well as social meanings and significance" (p. 103). In this sense, I share the aspirations of the study participants; I hope to follow their example in becoming a school principal committed to the common good. My current charge was to learn from their leadership model, their views, and their practices. Not a consultant, I neither passed judgment nor attempted to solve problems. Instead I sought collegial trust through a gentle probing of their notions on education.

Once data collection was complete, I employed an interpretative lens to reconcile "what is really present with what is imagined as present from the vantage point of possible meanings" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). The perspectives involved included those of the deans, their interviewed students, and my own observations. One administrator, George, whom I spotlight in this article, demonstrated significant cleavages between his pedagogical convictions and his actualized practice. Nevertheless, his initiative had measurably advanced the democratic participation of his students at the highest levels of decision making.

Methods of Exclusion

Administrators and students in four secondary schools noted for progressive practices were interviewed. Two were public and two were private, and all were located in northern New England. The public institutions were predictably more connected to their surrounding communities unto which they were pedagogically and financially accountable. The "parent communities" in the private schools, characterized by an elite corps of professionals desiring a sheltered environment for their offspring, lacked this local liability. Children not only had to apply for admission, they were also reminded of their "choice" in attending. In one interview, an administrator shared, "What I say to kids is based on the standards and assumptions I feel are appropriate. I'm the adult. It's my decision to make, and sorry if you don't like it. If you don't like it, you can leave." The idea that education is conditionally selective, and that powerful adults can determine a student's fate without due process, is anathema to democracy. This exclusivity lessened my intrigue in the two private institutions, both of which utilized that practice. While I viewed a similar student-centered governing structure at both a private and a public school, I chose to focus on the public institution for its requisite inclusiveness. Indeed, the effort to engage a socioeconomically and culturally heterogeneous community in a compulsory educational system may distinguish

true efforts in creating liberty and egalitarianism for all.

The two public secondary schools I observed differed in democratic practice and economic status. One school was less than a decade old, and was designed from its inception to mirror a liberal democratic form, in which governance is limited to a small circle familiar with pertinent issues and invested in their outcomes (Beane, 1990; Dixon, 1998). A central task of this elite is to fuel a propaganda machine in order to influence the only democratic outlet of the common people, voting (Dixon, 1998). The wealth evident in this community (the starting price on a one-family home was \$400,000) fit neatly into Anyon's (1980) depiction of the "executive elite school," in which "work is developing one's intellectual powers" (p. 272). One can easily attribute shared leadership and youth empowerment in this school to increased expectations of democratic engagement for parents and their children, augmenting an already prestigious public education. While the highest governing body of the school, the Community Council, was largely made up of students, this grouping was quite homogeneous, a select cadre within an already privileged population. Comparing these young citizens to those at Thompson, the latter of which I have called the luckiest little school, the former were considerably more informed and articulate. When asked, "What are the benefits to a system of student involvement?" the wealthy youth responded, "It's a great thing to have control over your education....The students have more say than everyone else....It becomes easy to control your future." This contrasts with the words of the Thompson pupils who, though less well-spoken, were no less convinced of the value of democratic participation. They reported, "So we don't get screwed over. There are less arguments. School is less frustrating."

While there is no shortage of scholarly justification to rationalize my predilection for Thompson over the advantaged school (e.g., Freire, 1993; Giroux, 2000; Hooks, 1994; Kozol, 1992; Meier, 1995), in truth my attraction is founded on a personal resonance with its lower middle and working class constituency. Equally significant, I am more taken by the tenets of community democracy than that of liberal representation.

The Beginnings of Community Democracy

What I found at Thompson School was a fledgling community democracy. Several school factors contributed to the risk-taking leadership and structural redesign. These included small size (Meier, 1995), critical empowerment (Kanpol, 1994), dialogue (Freire, 1993), and local control (Dewey, 1944; Dixon, 1998). Given the current tsunami of standardization of schooling, these progressive developments at Thompson deserve the attention of the critical pedagogue. Although still in the throes of the change process, the advances made at the secondary level in this K-12 institution have been remarkable. First was the creation of the Cabinet, whose membership includes teachers, staff, administrators, students, and community members. Second, two students have joined the local school board as non-voting members. Third, the entire high school (approximately 150 students and fifteen teachers) assembles for community meetings to discuss and vote on issues twice a month. How did these protocols emerge in a small rural

school typically marked by conservatism and efficiency? My intrigue was soon contended when I interviewed the newest administrator in the district.

George

George was hired as assistant principal of Thompson School three years previous to my visit. This was the school's third administrator in three years, and there was little sign that a new face would make a difference in the mainstays of the school, namely teacher isolation, student tracking, and sports worship. However, unlike previous leaders, the coming of George was revolutionary to Thompson School. His progressive pedagogy and flamboyant personality set forth a new district agenda.

The town of Thompson had been divided for decades between the traditional farming families who had settled the area in the late nineteenth century, and the students and alumni of an alternative college in the locale. Cultural and economic differences between the two groups were great and annually inflamed over property taxes, which accounted for most of the Thompson School budget.

Although George was a member of an old local family, he also was a graduate of the college. When I interviewed George over the course of an hour, he did not mention this surrounding context. Instead he focused exclusively on Thompson School, his heart's desire. Shortly after he assumed the position of co-administrator, he began a number of initiatives to increase student and community involvement in decision making.

His leadership caused Thompson to become the luckiest little high school. Unlike much other school reform, which is often designed and funded by corporate donors or state agencies, the changes at Thompson were homegrown by a local visionary who relied on both his positional authority, for which he was hired, and on democratic interventions, such as community dialogues and student involvement, in which he profoundly believed.

Love

I was greatly taken by George's choice of words during our interview. In describing education, he said, "Many schools for so long have been spirit-crushing institutions. I believe we need to create spirit-enlivening institutions. Part of that is to enliven the spirit of every child and let them believe that they have equity and equality in the school." He revealed his faith in that, "the kids have the answers," and pointed to a sign that read 'love' over the doorway. He said, "I put that sign love here so that anyone who comes in here for whatever reason passes through love both coming and leaving. I have passed through love. The answer is love, the big Buddha, Jesus, the big love."

In the era of sexual harassment and professional precaution, I was impressed by George's comfort in talking about love. He said that occasionally he talks about love in the presence of students. He shared, "I explained how you can love a group because you're with each other for three years and you get to know each other and you're committed. I know each one individually. Kids have come to me and said, 'We love you.'"

George acknowledged that a number of faculty and staff members at Thompson had had considerable difficulty with his emotional approach. In return, he expressed a desire to work with teachers who wanted to change, and to persuade others who “might need help in leaving.” A colleague had complained that he had “gone too far” in talking about love in the high school community meeting, and that it caused discomfort among the students. George acknowledged this differing perspective, saying, “that person is missing some love in himself...There’s probably some kids who felt uncomfortable, but they heard me say it. And more than that, they see me do it. They see me love them.”

George’s love was a love of humanity, of togetherness, and the pursuit of learning. While scholars and practitioners conventionally laud George’s intent with terms like “caring” (Noddings, 1992) or “compassion,” (Nash, 2002), George felt the professional ease and the personal freedom to express his devotion to students through love.

Ease

That I did not detect these powerful feelings among four Thompson sophomores I interviewed does not imply that they did not feel loved. They sat in George’s office with the lackadaisical confidence of teenagers comfortable with their surroundings. Considering the fact that this space was primarily used for disciplinary matters, the noticeable ease among the students may have indeed demonstrated that this was a place of love. This was also evidenced by one girl’s response to my question about the benefits of student involvement. She said, “When my siblings were here, there were a lot of issues. Now the adults really consider our opinions.”

Their dreams for Thompson were very different from that of George. While he envisioned the ideals of community democracy, such as student ownership of curricular content and empowerment to create change for a better world, the students matter-of-factly asked for more fundraising, more school spirit, and “more fans at the games.” Though they easily shared the ways in which students were involved, they also complained bitterly about students who did not appreciate or take part in these opportunities.

I also observed the goings-on of students in the school office as well as the hallways. Having visited Thompson on several occasions before the arrival of George, I was struck by the sharp contrast in school climate. The high office partitions that once blocked students from office staff were gone, replaced by an array of low desks and chairs utilized by staff and students alike. A boy in full make-up stepped in and spoke with a student office assistant. The “jock” culture that once permeated the total school environment years earlier would have never allowed such personal expression without cruel consequence.

George addressed this change in climate in our interview. He shared that some students had complained to him that Thompson was becoming “a hippie school” because of the increased attention to the arts. He responded to their concern with the question, “Why can’t artists be athletes?” George felt that the underlying issue was that students didn’t feel valued at school. Recognizing their accomplishments at community meetings had yet to

appease all factions of the student body, he felt. However, his efforts had already impacted high school enrollment. During his first year, fourteen students had paid tuition to enroll in neighboring schools. Just two years later, only two students had transferred out, plus two students from neighboring districts chose to attend Thompson.

Right outside the office, the once empty hallway was now inhabited by studying and talking teens. Since the elimination of study halls, the students sat on benches painted with pictures and poems. Bright murals and countless bulletin boards covered the cinderblock hallways, a student space.

Dreams

Clearly George had a vision for another way of educating that few others in the school had imagined. I asked him how his ideal compared to what he currently saw happening at Thompson. I will quote him at length in order to do justice to his response.

We are far from the ideal democratic school. We should be at a place where students help design the classes. It's still a very adult-centered school. [I want to see] students help grow cafeteria food and clean the school. Everyone would be working together. We would not be stuck in discipline concepts, like [teachers saying], "I'm an expert in science, so I do only science." Teachers would help them structure their day so they can learn from the experts, math, etc. We would have academics in the morning, and in the afternoon it would be more of being a familial community group, giving to each other. We would be doing weekly community meeting, and community singing, a shared vibration...I think we should start our week Monday morning and end our week Friday afternoon with shared vibrations. Those are some of the ideal pieces. The whole library would be chosen by the students. The physical structure of the school would be designed better for students and staff. Now it's designed for that factory prison model. We have eighty-six acres. We could create a historical farm here with cows, sheep, horses. We'd get pork, corn we can eat. At the same time other schools can come and say that's how they used to do that. Plus I think we can do better with smaller buildings around. I'd love to see us do a Native American longhouse where the whole school community can fit for a meeting. But we have a long way to go. That's another thing, to say: "we, we, we" instead of "I, I, I" or "they, they, they." That's democracy, too.

Entanglements with Community Democracy

The contradictions I witnessed between democratic theory and programmatic implementation were troubling. However I must acknowledge that in no way did the members of Thompson express that they were a community democracy, or even a school pursuing democratic education. Based on my observations of the site, I have imposed this term on Thompson to explain the phenomena of reform underway. Yet with some disappointment

I cannot claim that no gap exists between critical democratic theory and the actual school practice underway. In review I found three unexpected themes as most noteworthy: luck, power, and risk. In elucidating these elements deduced from Thompson, I will level my enthusiasm with precaution of its potential vulnerability.

Luck

Without hesitation do I attribute the anomaly of democratic leadership at Thompson to extraordinary luck. For a community divided for decades by education, class, and political conviction to be unified by a native personifying all perspectives is nothing less than astonishing luck. I have seen many rural schools impoverished more by a lack of creativity and vision on the part of hierarchical functionaries than by a dearth of financial support. Little in Thompson's history could have caused its current democratic course in hiring a social idealist, reorienting its teachers, and empowering its youth.

Luck is not a theory. It is serendipity, and can fade fast. During an interview, George articulated the great obstacles he faced in challenging families accustomed to local power. Safeguarding fairness and due process in the school system had resulted in anything but luck for George. The first year he was "cursed out on a regular basis," and the windows of his home were smashed with bricks. But the combination of courage and stamina George possessed was extremely fortunate for Thompson, for the early stages of change were as much a personal threat as a professional trial. Lucky for this community, George's vision persevered through the growing pains.

Power

George is in a position of great power. Once hired as the primary disciplinarian to assist the building principal, his influence has spread to virtually every corner of the school district. Before long, he was promoted to co-administrator, and currently considers his efforts to be "very effective." In our interview, George recalled many instances in which he exerted his authoritarian power in order to forge change, as in teacher and classroom reassignments. Several "old guard" teachers had left during George's short tenure, allowing him more opportunity to advance his vision by hiring candidates to his liking. A Thompson faculty member described that his evangelical zeal simply overwhelmed people accustomed to the formality of the conventional bureaucrat. While George may justify these moves as best for the school community, such unilateral action is anathema to democratic practice. His reliance on positional power to further democratic ends is paradoxical, and possibly symptomatic of the early stages of progressive transformation. In a micro institution characterized since its inception by a rigid hierarchy of decision making, how else can change occur? George felt compelled to make an immediate difference in lives of the children. His vision of a school of caring educators and empowered youth needed potent authority to inhibit past patterns detrimental to a community democracy. Despite his

affinity toward egalitarianism, George relied on the traditional school structure of top-down decision making whenever he felt it necessary.

George's tendency to dominate, however laden with good intentions, was manifest at the Cabinet meeting I observed. At the assemblage of the highest governing board, he broke out of his role as facilitator numerous times during the one-hour session. Typically a facilitator talks little of his own views and instead focuses on eliciting dialogue from participants. George did not concern himself with this obligation, and instead ran the meeting with a view to efficiently complete school business. The only time the student Cabinet member spoke was to propose reading announcements over the intercom. To this, George turned toward her with a single word, "No." In addition, the sole community member present voiced concern about communication between the school and community. George recited the numerous ways in which school personnel already communicated with town residents and then moved on with the agenda. Twice the community member asked to return to the subject, which she felt unresolved. Finally George asked, "What do you want the Cabinet to do about it?" All members were silent. He ended the matter by referring her to the communication committee.

Despite George's curt responses, the Cabinet meeting had a friendly atmosphere, with a congeniality between members and an appreciation in taking part in this uncommon collective. The participants appeared to like George and enjoy his humor and character. However, the essence of democratic reform cannot be sustained by any form of personal adoration (Fullan, 2002). The risk of loss is too great.

Risk

The luckiest little school is at great risk of losing its prophet. That the congregation of teachers, parents, and students may enjoy the benefits of democratic practices that bring voice into action in no way implies a capacity to foster democratic leadership absent their pioneer. George is a man on the move toward great change in the town he loves, but he may also have other career aspirations. The tenure of principals in Thompson as well as in the rest of the region is notably brief, some three years, before transferring elsewhere. Now that he has peaked the state average tenure, a decision from George to seek a more prestigious position in a more affluent district could spell doom for Thompson School. Since George has a great personal investment as a graduate of the school and a lifetime community member of the town, a departure in the near future is unlikely. However, it is very possible that if a conservative backlash overwhelms the school board, ousts its student membership, and opposes his vision of change, George may abandon the struggle. Only when a treasure is so rich is a populace so defenseless. The people of Thompson must take extraordinary care of its human wealth.

As a school leader, George must take precautions to secure that his efforts for democratic practice endure. Student membership on the school board, the Cabinet, and standing committees must be written into the by-laws of school governance similar to those of a non-profit organization. Positive sentiment and generous lip service cannot survive a leadership change

or political turmoil battling educational conservatism. Thompson is especially susceptible to a regressive fluctuation to the right because the pendulum has swung so far to the left. Unfortunately, in terms of democratic education, there is no middle “balance” between two movements. Structural changes require a cultural conversion if they are to endure. For example, the current student handbook neglects to mention student involvement in decision making. The Cabinet, community meeting, and school board membership are not included in the patchwork of belief statements, discipline codes, and eligibility guidelines. A redesign of school governance has yet to be officially adopted. There is still an omnipresence that the administration runs the school, and that these officials take liberty to include others only as they deem appropriate. While I found that George’s judgment reflects democratic ideals to determine student, teacher, and community involvement, I found little evidence to suggest that other district leaders, such as the other co-administrator and superintendent, exercise such discretion predisposed toward democracy.

Hope

The failure on the part of the Thompson students to articulate their understanding of governance and democracy is also a call for alarm. The executive elite public school I discussed earlier utilized classroom instruction in order to connect students to the enlightened system. Through learning and applying the tenets of liberal democracy, these teens easily spoke of their school’s structure and culture, which emphasized the centrality of student leadership. The message was everywhere: democratic learning principles posted in every classroom, a bulletin board of the Community Council, and frequent publicity of opportunities for involvement. The leadership at Thompson needs to expose their achievements in community democracy as well as establish systemic reform reflecting those ideals. Thompson community members can visit other schools pursuing democratic practices, both public and private, and seek transferability to strengthen their own system. Professional development for faculty and training for students in democratic education can lead to an enduring participatory systems change. Classroom learning can involve activities for small-scale decision making as training for wider student leadership. Together they can become transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 1985) and critical agents in shaping the world they collectively inhabit. The love and ease George puts forth to sustain creative and caring growth at Thompson would be furthered, not compromised, by transforming his ideals into adopted protocols.

These recommendations are not given with false optimism or a naïve faith in a remarkable man. My intent was to depict the promise of this very rare opportunity in a tiny rural high school to realize a learning collective devoted to egalitarianism and justice. At present, American schools are in the throes of No Child Left Behind, a formula many educational leaders believe will lead to social inequity and service privatization, a major blow for a democratic nation. The efforts underway at Thompson are nothing less than a bright spotlight on a dimming stage. To concentrate on its shortcomings in the third year of progressive reform is to undercut the meager hope

that our children may experience the democratic education to which they are entitled, and not languish in socioeconomic forces reproducing their prospects.

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